
Partnership Helps Mothers With Substance Abuse Problems “Rebound”

Do partnerships really add value? Can they work to benefit the offender and the community? My experience says yes, they do. But they require more perspiration than inspiration, and they demand constant communication among the partners.

A team of professionals—a probation officer, a social worker, and a family worker—works with each woman who is accepted into the Rebound program. The team coordinates the probation order, the child protection case plan (where applicable), and the woman’s own goals for both herself and her family.

The program is demanding. Each woman is visited in her home every week. She also comes to the office monthly to meet with the team to review her goals and progress. She is expected to attend weekly parenting classes and a monthly women’s support group, and she may be involved in other treatment programs or therapy. She often works with the child protection agency. Rebound is intense and rigorous for the participants. A woman who is successful in the program will be maintaining sobriety, gaining skills in parenting and basic living, accessing resources in the community, successfully completing probation, and enjoying the successful return of her children into the home and/or maintaining custody of her children.

The Importance of Teamwork

How does “teamwork” enhance services for these women? There are several ways:

- ◆ Because the “team” includes the woman and her personal goals, Rebound embraces her as a partner or stakeholder in the service process. Working in partnership with the woman and her family allows the team to identify resources that support the woman’s interests, values, and preferences. Naturally, this approach increases her personal commitment to the overall success of the plan.
- ◆ By blending the efforts of several agencies, Rebound provides easier access to a more comprehensive network of services than any one worker or agency could make available. Improving access to services is one small step in empowering women to make good choices for themselves and their families.
- ◆ Because the team itself is comprised of a diverse group of individuals, Rebound offers women of all backgrounds and orientations not just the

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opportunity to experience support and guidance in culturally appropriate ways, but to experience the richness of diversity from their own uniqueness.

Obstacles to Overcome

Inevitably, as with any collaborative effort, there are obstacles to overcome in a program of this nature. Rebound mingles not just the various disciplines of corrections, social services, and therapy, but also the players themselves, bringing together government agencies and a private social service agency. Even when only two agencies from the same county are involved, differences abound. Business is not conducted in the same way in probation offices as it is in the office of a social worker.

Take a fairly typical example of a woman in Rebound who experiences a relapse. The way a probation officer would typically deal with that situation, compared to how her social worker would respond, is only the beginning of potential conflict. If these professionals embrace different philosophies of addiction (abstinence versus harm reduction, for example) another factor comes into play. Determining how the team will ultimately respond can become a problem for a group of professionals, each of whom wants to succeed professionally in her

respective discipline and each of whom has her own set of beliefs about what is in the best interest of the Rebound participant.

I liken our team approach to step-parenting in a blended family. In order to do it successfully, each professional has to be equally valued and trusted to make the best decision for each participant. When differences crop up, and they will, each team member must be able not only to communicate her own preferences and opinions, but also to hear the opinions of the others. Ultimately, everyone has to compromise at some point, and each team member needs to be able to present and support the team decision to the participant.

Team members must be committed to keeping their professional differences out of their relationships with program

participants and at the same time be able to engage in debates. Sometimes good professional discourse is the way to get to the best answer even when it feels adversarial in nature.

Profile: Project Rebound, Hennepin County (Minneapolis), Minnesota

Partner agencies:

Hennepin County Community Corrections
Hennepin County Children and Family Services
Reuben Lindh Family Services

Brief description:

Rebound is a program for women who are on probation. The target offender is a woman on probation for a felony or gross misdemeanor offense who has an identified substance abuse issue and who is a primary caregiver of at least one child under the age of 12 at risk due to maternal substance abuse.

Launched:

1991, with a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services and the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance. Since 1995, it has operated solely on state grant funds and the contributions of the county agencies involved.

All of this is a delicate balancing act that demands constant communication and flexibility. It can be tough—just ask any step-parent. But when it works, a woman in Rebound is empowered, nurtured, and guided. She is reunified with her children, benefits from the therapies offered her family, and meets the expectations of probation. She experiences success.

Keys to Effective Teamwork

As a practical matter, one good way to ensure constant communication among agency partners is to have regular team meetings. Rebound staff members meet weekly, sometimes for several hours, to review cases.

Trust levels are easier to maintain when everyone on the team has the same information. Program participants are routinely reminded that what is told any one of the team is shared with everyone on the team. This has proved invaluable not just in preserving team trust and integrity, but in helping minimize manipulation by participants.

Rebound staff also have a weekly meeting with a therapist from the Unified Therapy Department of Reuben Lindh Family Services. This has been an excellent tool for managing philosophical and personal differences among the staff and finding effective ways to work together. Working with women and their children is an intimate business and can be emotionally charged even for the most seasoned professionals. Giving team members a way to talk through differences and process stressful encounters helps keep the team productive and focuses on a team perspective.

So, can teamwork really work? Yes. It can work exceedingly well. ■

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